

XVII

To Gallus

You are surprised, it seems, that I am so fond of my Laurentinum, or (if you like the appellation better) my Laurens: but you will cease to wonder, when I acquaint you with the charm of the villa, the advantages of its situation, and the extensive prospect of the sea-coast. It is but seventeen miles distant from Rome; so that having finished your affairs in town, you can spend the night here after completing a full working-day. There are two different roads to it; if you go by that of Laurentum, you must turn off at the fourteenth mile-stone; if by Ostia, at the eleventh. Both of them are in some parts sandy, which makes it something heavy and tedious if you travel in a coach, but easy and pleasant to those who ride. The landscape on all sides is extremely diversified, the prospect in some places being confined by woods, in others extending over broad meadows, where numberless flocks of sheep and herds of horses and cattle, which the severity of the winter has drove from the mountains, fatten in the vernal warmth of this rich pasturage.

My villa is large enough for my convenience, without being expensive to maintain. The entrance-hall is plain, but not mean, through which you enter into a portico in the form of the Letter D, which includes a small, but agreeable area. This affords a capital retreat in bad weather, as it is sheltered by glazed windows, and much more by overhanging eaves. From the middle of this portico you pass into an inward hall extremely pleasant, and from thence into a handsome enough dining-room which runs out towards the sea; so that when a south-west wind drives the sea shoreward, it is gently washed by the edge of the last breakers. On every side of this room there are either folding doors or windows equally large, by which means you have a view from the front and the sides, as it were of three different seas; from the back part you see the middle court, the portico and the area; and by another view you look through the portico into the atrium, from whence the prospect is terminated by the woods and mountains which are seen at a distance.

On the left-hand of this room, something retired from its façade, lies a large drawing-room, and beyond that, a second of a smaller size which has one window to the rising, and another to the setting sun: this has likewise a prospect of the sea, but being at a greater distance, is less incommoded by it. The angle which the projection of the hall makes with this drawing-room, retains and increases the warmth of the sun; this serves as a winter retreat, and also as a gymnasium for my household; it is sheltered from all winds except those which are generally attended with clouds, so that nothing can render this place useless, but what at the same time destroys the fair weather. Contiguous to this, is a room forming the segment of a circle, the windows of which are so placed as to receive the sun the whole day; in the wall is contrived a cupboard like a bookcase, which contains a collection of such authors whose works can never be read too often. From hence you pass into a bedchamber through a passage, which having a boarded floor over a stove which runs underneath, and pipes in the walls, tempers the heat which it receives and conveys to the adjacent rooms. The remainder of this side of the house is appropriated to the use of my slaves and freedmen, but however most of the apartments in it are neat enough to entertain guests.

In the opposite wing is a very elegant parlour; next to which lies another room, which though large for a parlour, makes but a moderate dining-room; it is exceedingly warmed and enlightened not only by the direct rays of the sun, but by their reflection from the sea. Beyond this is a chamber, together with its ante-chamber, the height of which renders it cool in summer, as its being sheltered on all sides from the winds makes it warm in winter. To this apartment another of the same sort is joined by one common wall. From thence you enter into the grand and spacious cooling-room belonging to the baths, from the opposite walls of which two basins curve outwards as though the wall were pressed into half-hoops; these are fully large enough, if you consider that the sea is close by. Contiguous to this is the anointing room, the furnace adjoining, and boiler-room; then come two other little bathing-rooms, which are fitted up in an elegant rather than costly manner: annexed to this, is a warm bath of extraordinary workmanship, wherein one may swim, and have a prospect at the same time of the sea. Not far from hence stands the tennis-court, which lies open to the warmth of the afternoon sun. From thence you ascend a sort of turret, which contains two entire apartments below; there are the same number above, besides a dining-room which commands a very extensive prospect of the sea and coast, together with the beautiful villas that stand upon it. There is a second turret, containing a room which takes both the rising and setting sun. Behind this is a store-room and a larder, and underneath a spacious dining-room where the sea roaring in tempest is not felt, but only heard, and that faintly: it looks upon the garden and the *allée*, which surrounds the garden.

The *allée* is encompassed with a box-tree hedge, and where that is decayed, with rosemary; for the box in those parts which are sheltered by the buildings, preserves its verdure perfectly well: but where by an open situation it lies exposed to the winds and to the dashing sea-water, though at a great distance, it entirely withers. Between the garden and this *allée* runs a shady walk of vines, soft and yielding to the tread, even when you walk bare-foot. The garden is thickly planted with fig and mulberry trees, to which this soil is as favourable as it is averse to all others. In this place is a banqueting room, which though it stands remote from the sea, enjoys however a prospect nothing inferior to that view: two apartments run round the back part of it, whose windows look respectively upon the entrance of the villa, and into a well-stocked kitchen garden.

From hence a gallery extends itself, which by its size you might take for a public one. It has a range of windows on each side, but on that which looks towards the sea they are double the number of those next the garden. When the weather is fair and serene, these are all thrown open; but if it blows, those on the side the wind sits are shut, while the others remained unclosed without any inconvenience. Before this gallery lies a terrace perfumed with violets, and warmed by the reflection of the sun from the gallery, which as it retains the rays, so it keeps off the north-east wind; and it is as warm on this side, as it is cool on the opposite: in the same manner it is a defence against the south-west, and thus in short, by means of its several sides, breaks the force of the winds from what point soever they blow. These are some of the winter advantages of this building, which however has still more considerable in the summer; for at that season it throws a shade upon the terrace during all the forenoon, as it defends the nearest part of the *allée* and garden from the afternoon sun, and casts a greater or less shade either way as the day either increases or decreases; but the portico itself is then shadiest when the sun is most scorching, that is, when its rays fall directly upon the roof. To these advantages I must not forget to add, that by setting open the windows, the western breezes have a free draught, and by that means the enclosed air is prevented from stagnating.

Crowning the terrace, portico, and garden, stands a detached building, which I call my *favourite*: and in truth I am extremely fond of it, as I erected it myself. It contains a very warm winter-room, one side of which looks upon the terrace, the other has a view of the sea, and both lie exposed to the sun; and a chamber looking by folding-doors upon the enclosed portico and by a window on the sea. Against the middle wall stands a little elegant retired closet, which by means of glass doors and a curtain, is either laid into the adjoining room, or separated from it. It holds a couch and two chairs. As you lie upon this couch, from the feet you have a prospect of the sea; if you look behind, you see the neighbouring villa; and from the head you have a view of the woods: these three views may be seen either distinctly from so many different windows in the room, or blended together in one confused prospect. Adjoining to this, is a bed-chamber, which neither the voice of the servants, the murmur of the sea, nor even the roaring of a tempest can reach; not lightning nor the day itself can penetrate it, unless you open the windows. This profound tranquillity is occasioned by a passage, which divides the wall of this chamber from that of the garden, and thus, by means of that void intervening space, every noise is drowned. Annexed, is a small stove-room, which, by opening a little window, warms the bed-chamber to the degree of heat required. Beyond this lie a chamber and ante-chamber which catch the rising sun and enjoy it, though obliquely indeed, till the afternoon. When I retire to this garden-apartment, I fancy myself a hundred miles from my own house, and take particular pleasure in it at the feast of the Saturnalia, when, by the licence of that season of joy, every other part of my villa resounds with the mirth of my domestics: thus I neither interrupt their diversions, nor they my studies.

Among the pleasures and conveniences of this situation, there is one disadvantage, and that is, the want of a running stream; but this defect is in a great measure supplied by wells, or rather I should call them springs, for they rise very near the surface. And indeed the quality of this coast is pretty remarkable; for in what part soever you dig, you meet, upon the first turning up of the ground, with a spring of pure water, not in the least salt, though so near the sea. The neighbouring forests afford an abundant supply of fuel; every other convenience of life may be had from Ostia: to a moderate man, indeed, even the next village (between which and my house there is only one villa) would furnish all common necessities. In that little place there are no less than three public baths; which is a great convenience if one happens to arrive home unexpectedly, or make too short a stay to allow time for preparing my own.

The whole coast is beautifully diversified by the joining or detached villas that are spread upon it, which whether you are travelling along the sea or the shore, have the effect of a series of towns. The shore is sometimes, after a long calm, loose and yielding to the feet, though in general, by the winds driving the waves upon it, it is compact and firm. I cannot boast that our sea produces the more costly sorts of fish; however, it supplies us with exceeding fine soles and prawns; but as to provisions of other kinds, my villa pretends to equal even inland countries, particularly in milk; for thither the cattle come from the meadows in great numbers whenever they seek shade or water.

Tell me now, have I not just cause to bestow my time and my affection upon this agreeable retreat? Surely you are unreasonably attached to the pleasures of the town, if you have no hankering after it; as I much wish you had, that to so many charms with which my favourite villa abounds, it might have the very considerable addition of your presence to recommend it. Farewell.

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